

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

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Richard E. Decker, Publisher

Gladys Foster Decker, Editorial Director

Ernest M. Hutter, Editor

Patricia Hitchcock

Marguerite Blair Deacon

Associate Editor

Art Director

*One who ventures afield for green pastures may find himself encompassed by hay.*



**I**'M LOOKING for the push button," James Hartley said.

I smiled. "Really?"

He stared glumly at his reflection in the bar mirror. "Someplace

in this stinking world there's a push button and when it's pressed, the whole damn planet blows up."

He looked my way. "Someday I'm going to find that push button,

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and when I do, I'm going to press it."

I sighed. "Obviously you are unhappy, but why insist upon taking the rest of the world with you?"

Hartley, a well-dressed man in his thirties, shrugged. "I'd be doing everybody a favor. Existence hurts too much."

I watched him finish his second martini, then said, "Would you care for another one, Mr. Hartley?"

He automatically glanced at his watch before he nodded. "I guess I got time for one more." He frowned. "How did you know my name? We never met before, did we?"

"Not on this plan . . ." I caught the bartender's eye and signaled for two more drinks.

Hartley's eyes went to the small box on the bar in front of me. "What's that?"

"A box," I said.

He shrugged. "All right. So it's none of my business."

I waited until the bartender had brought our drinks and retired. "Rather a coincidence that I should run into you while I was looking for Alberti," I said.

Hartley sipped from his glass. "So who's Alberti?"

I tapped the box. "I have to give this to him. He may keep it an entire year, but I do hope that this

time it will be put to good . . ."

Hartley eyed the box again. "What you got in there? Jewels or something?"

"No." I very carefully raised the cover.

Hartley glanced in, frowned, then looked at me. "What's that?"

"A push button," I said.

He stared at it again and then at me. He turned resolutely back to his drink. Hartley said nothing for a long while. Finally he exhaled loudly. "Now don't tell me that your little push button will actually . . ."

"Of course," I said. "However, it isn't your turn. Mr. Alberti has a priority."

He shook his head. "How could something that *small* . . ."

"Size has absolutely nothing to do with it," I said. "The box could be as large as a pyramid or as small as a pea. It is the Will of Intent it contains that counts."

He glared at the pushbutton. "So if I press that damn thing, the world will actually . . ."

"Yes."

He snorted. "Like hell." His hand moved toward the box, one finger extended.

"Now, really, Mr. Hartley, I don't think you're being at all fair to Mr. Alberti." I rubbed my jaw. "Well, if you really *insist*, I suppose I *could* let you press it."

Hartley's hand stopped and he glanced at me sharply. He withdrew the finger. "I'm not worried about anything cataclysmic happening, but maybe you got a little nitroglycerin or something like that in there?"

I smiled. "You think that I might be contemplating self-destruction and I simply do not have the courage to press the button myself? And I am trying to persuade you into doing the job for me?" I shook my head. "No, that is not the case at all." I reached into the box and lifted the push button.

Hartley regarded it warily. "It looks just like an ordinary push button."

"So it does," I said, "and mounted in a piece of wood." I shoved it closer to him. "Why not press it?"

He licked his lips. "Why should I?"

I sighed. "Ah, well, so be it. But I have great hopes for Mr. Alberti. He's the sixteenth, you know."

"The sixteenth?"

I nodded. "You see, Mr. Hartley, your sincere desire to blow the world to bits is not entirely unique. As a matter of fact, the wish has been expressed so often that the . . . ah . . . Chief decided that we might just as well capitalize upon it. So we prepared this little push

button and we have, so far, presented it to fifteen people, allowing each one of them a year in which to destroy the world."

His eyes were on the push button. "And none of them did?"

I chuckled. "Obviously not. All of them had—shall we say—*big* mouths, but when it actually came to *pressing* the button, they chickened out and I was forced to re-claim the package. However, I



have great hopes for Alberti. He is quite a desperate man, on the verge of bankruptcy."

Hartley cleared his throat. "You mean that sometime during the year . . ."

I nodded. "It could happen at any moment, day or night, Just a slight pressure of the finger and . . . pfff!"

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He licked his lips. "Suppose someone wanted to buy that thing from you? How much would you ask?"

I shook my head. "Now, Mr. Hartley, mortals may find money useful, but what possible use could I . . ." I turned as a rather stout, gray-haired man passed us and took a seat at the farther end of the bar.

"Excuse me," I said, "I believe that's Alberti."

I re-boxed the push button and moved down beside Alberti. When I departed fifteen minutes later, the box and its contents were in his possession.

I saw the stout, gray-haired man again an hour later in the dining room at the Meridith Hotel.

He looked up as I approached. "Hartley bought the push button

from me for exactly ten thousand."

I sat down at his table. "Well, Pete, I guess it pays to listen to bartenders when they talk about some of their customers. That's how I learned that Hartley always gets onto the subject of that push button after a drink or two."

I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked back.

It was Hartley and another man. They showed their badges.

In the squad car, Detective Sergeant Hartley said, "That's the first time I've been approached personally by con artists." He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "But suppose there really *is* a push button, and suppose I *did* find it. Would I really have the nerve to push it?"

I stared at him coldly. If he didn't, I would.

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*I want to thank all of you for your interest.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Pat Hitchcock*